

Echoes of Feminist Existentialism in Jean-Paul Sartre's Intimacy

Rishab Saha

saharishab0@gmail.com

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Abstract— This paper examines the intersections of existential philosophy and feminist thought in Jean-Paul Sartre's short story "Intimacy". Drawing upon the philosophical frameworks of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and other key theorists, the study explores how the narrative reflects themes of freedom, identity, and the condition of woman as the 'Other.' Through an analytical approach, the paper investigates the psychological and existential struggles of the female characters, particularly Lulu, highlighting the tension between autonomy and social conditioning. It further argues that while Sartre's work does not explicitly engage with feminist discourse, Beauvoirian influence is evident in its portrayal of gendered experience. The paper concludes that "Intimacy" offers a subtle yet significant engagement with existential feminism, revealing the complex dynamics between embodiment, freedom, and identity.



Keywords— Existentialism, Feminism, Sartre, Beauvoir, Intimacy

I. INTRODUCTION

"If I became a philosopher... it was all been to seduce women basically" (Sartre). The remark, often read as ironic or provocative, opens up a compelling entry point into the philosophical and interpersonal complexities that shape Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of human relations, particularly within the domain of intimacy.

According to Martin Heidegger, intimacy may be understood as "a state of intense belongingness which arises from a meaningful connection or mutual dependence... [and] cannot be reduced to emotional experience" (Wrathall, 2021, pp. 429–430). Rather than implying fusion or the dissolution of difference, intimacy, in this sense, marks a dynamic coexistence of alterity and proximity. This philosophical framing becomes crucial in examining Sartre's treatment of interpersonal relationships, where intimacy is frequently entangled with conflict, ambiguity, and the instability of selfhood.

In *Intimacy*, included in *The Wall* (1939), Sartre interrogates the Cartesian assumption that emotions transparently reveal inner truths (Sartre, 2018). The narrative demonstrates how characters act in bad faith, unable to distinguish between genuine feeling and socially

conditioned sentiment (Sartre, 2021). Through the character of Lulu, the text foregrounds the tension between freedom and self-deception, exposing the fragility of human relationships when confronted with existential choice.

While the story does not explicitly situate itself within feminist discourse, its thematic concerns invite a reading through the lens of Existential Feminism. The influence of Simone de Beauvoir is particularly significant in this regard. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir articulates the condition of woman as the "Other," a concept that resonates with Lulu's constrained agency and internal conflict (Beauvoir, 2015). Her experiences can thus be understood not merely as individual psychological struggles but as reflections of a broader gendered condition shaped by social expectations and existential limitations.

Furthermore, the intellectual and personal proximity between Sartre and Beauvoir complicates any attempt to treat their philosophies as entirely distinct. Their collaborative engagement with questions of freedom, embodiment, and subjectivity suggests a shared conceptual terrain in which existential and feminist concerns intersect. In this context, *Intimacy* may be read as a literary site where

these intersections are implicitly negotiated, particularly through its representation of female subjectivity.

This paper examines how Sartre's *Intimacy* anticipates a feminist existential critique by revealing the gendered limitations of freedom within intimate relationships. By analyzing the characters of Lulu and Rirette, it aims to uncover the underlying structures of gendered experience embedded within the text. In doing so, the study attempts to bridge existential philosophy and feminist theory, demonstrating how *Intimacy* offers a nuanced exploration of freedom, identity, and the politics of intimacy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between Existentialism and feminist thought has been widely explored, particularly in relation to questions of subjectivity, freedom, and identity. While Jean-Paul Sartre emphasizes individual autonomy, later feminist critiques reveal the limitations of this seemingly universal subject.

A central contribution to this discourse is made by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 2015), where she conceptualizes woman as the "Other." This challenges the neutrality of existential subjectivity by demonstrating how women's identities are shaped in relation to patriarchal structures.

The philosophical understanding of relational existence is further informed by Martin Heidegger's notion of "being-with" (Wrathall, 2021) which highlights that intimacy involves both connection and the persistence of difference. Feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray extend this critique by exposing the phallogocentric foundations of Western thought, while Judith Butler reconceptualises gender as a performative construct (Butler, 2006).

Scholars like Rosemarie Tong situate existential feminism within a broader theoretical framework (Tong, 1989), emphasising Beauvoir's role in bridging existential and feminist thought. Additionally, critical perspectives such as those of Saunak Samajdar highlight how structures of knowledge and intimacy are shaped by gendered exclusions (Samajdar, 2006).

Despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to the intersection of existentialism and feminist thought within Sartre's literary works. This study addresses this gap by examining how *Intimacy* reflects and negotiates these theoretical concerns through its representation of female subjectivity.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology, grounded in close textual analysis. The primary text under consideration is *The Wall*, with particular focus on the short story *Intimacy*. The analysis is conducted through a theoretical framework that brings together Existentialism and Existential Feminism.

The study relies on interpretative reading strategies to examine how philosophical concepts such as freedom, bad faith, and being-for-itself operate within the narrative structure and characterisation. These concepts are primarily drawn from the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2021), and are further examined in relation to the feminist critique articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 2015).

Secondary sources, including critical essays and theoretical texts, are used to support and contextualise the analysis. The methodology is thus both analytical and comparative, as it seeks to identify conceptual overlaps and tensions between Sartrean existentialism and Beauvoirian feminism.

Rather than employing empirical or quantitative methods, the study emphasises interpretative depth, focusing on character analysis, thematic patterns, and philosophical implications within the text. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how gendered subjectivity and existential conflict are represented in *Intimacy*, particularly through the experiences of the female characters Lulu and Rirette.

IV. RESULTS

The analysis reveals that *Intimacy* presents a complex representation of freedom that is deeply entangled with psychological conflict and social conditioning. While Sartrean philosophy posits freedom as an inherent and unavoidable condition of human existence (Sartre, 2021), the narrative demonstrates that such freedom is experienced as both burden, particularly by the female characters.

Lulu's character emerges as a central site of this tension. Her inability to decisively choose between her husband Henri and her lover Pierre reflects a state of bad faith (Sartre, 2021), wherein she simultaneously recognises and evades her own freedom. This oscillation between awareness and denial illustrates the existential paradox of freedom: the individual is condemned to choose, yet often seeks refuge in indecision or external justification.

Furthermore, the study finds that Lulu's predicament is not merely individual but structurally conditioned. Her choices are constrained by social expectations surrounding marriage, morality, and feminine identity. In this sense, her experience aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's notion of

woman as the “Other,” whose subjectivity is shaped in relation to patriarchal norms (Beauvoir, 2015). The internalisation of these norms contributes to her inability to exercise authentic freedom.

The analysis also highlights the role of intimacy as a site of instability rather than harmony. Relationships within the narrative are marked by misrecognition, emotional ambiguity, and a persistent failure to achieve genuine connection. This reinforces the Sartrean idea that the presence of the other complicates, rather than completes, the self.

Additionally, the comparative reading suggests that while Jean-Paul Sartre does not explicitly engage with feminist theory, his portrayal of female subjectivity inadvertently reflects concerns central to existential feminism. The narrative thus reveals an implicit convergence between existentialist and feminist thought, particularly in its depiction of constrained agency and the struggle for authentic existence.

Overall, the findings indicate that *Intimacy* functions as a literary space where philosophical concepts of freedom, identity, and otherness are not only explored but also problematised through gendered experience.

V. DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Intimacy* reveals that the concept of freedom, central to Existentialism, operates within the narrative as both a condition of possibility and a source of psychological distress. As Jean-Paul Sartre suggests, individuals are “condemned to be free” (Sartre, 2021), compelled to make choices without external guarantees. However, the text demonstrates that this freedom is not experienced as liberating; rather, it manifests as a burden that produces anxiety, indecision, and ultimately, bad faith.

Lulu's character embodies this existential tension. Her hesitation is most visible in the moments where she reflects on her relationships in isolation, particularly while lying in the hotel room and oscillating between thoughts of Henri and Pierre. These moments of introspection do not lead to clarity but instead deepen her confusion, illustrating her inability to translate awareness into action. Her retreat into habitual existence—returning to Henri despite recognising the emotional and physical discomfort of the relationship—signifies not the absence of freedom, but an unwillingness to confront its consequences. In this sense, her predicament exemplifies Sartre's notion of bad faith (Sartre, 2021), where the individual denies their freedom in order to escape responsibility.

Furthermore, the narrative complicates the idea of intimacy by presenting it not as a harmonious union, but as a site of

instability and misrecognition. This is evident in Lulu's interactions with both Henri and Rirette. Her physical proximity to Henri is marked by discomfort and aversion, while her fascination with Rirette introduces a different kind of emotional and bodily ambiguity. These relationships fail to produce genuine connection, instead revealing a persistent gap between desire and fulfilment. Intimacy, therefore, emerges not as resolution but as a space where the self is continually unsettled by the presence of others.

A feminist reading of the text, informed by Simone de Beauvoir, reveals that Lulu's struggle is not purely individual but structurally conditioned. In *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 2015), Beauvoir conceptualises woman as the “Other,” whose identity is shaped in relation to patriarchal norms. Lulu's indecision can be traced to this condition: her sense of responsibility towards Henri, despite her lack of love, reflects the internalisation of social expectations surrounding marriage and feminine duty. Her inability to pursue an alternative life with Pierre is not simply hesitation, but a manifestation of these ingrained norms.

Beauvoir's analysis of the female body further deepens this reading. While existentialism posits an abstract, ungendered consciousness, Beauvoir demonstrates that embodiment plays a crucial role in shaping lived experience. The female body, rather than functioning as a neutral medium, often becomes a site of limitation and contradiction. Lulu's discomfort with physical intimacy and her simultaneous attraction towards Rirette illustrate this tension, where desire, embodiment, and social conditioning intersect in complex ways.

The discussion also gains further dimension when considered alongside later feminist and philosophical developments. Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity suggests that identity is constituted through repeated social practices rather than fixed essence (Butler, 2006). Lulu's shifting roles—as wife, lover, and uncertain subject—reflect this instability, as she attempts to navigate expectations that are externally imposed yet internally sustained.

Similarly, A Foucauldian understanding of power and subjectification offers insight into the limitations of freedom within social structures. Lulu's decisions are not made in isolation but are shaped by moral codes and social norms that define acceptable behaviour. Her ultimate choice to remain within her existing circumstances reflects the subtle operation of power, where control is internalised rather than externally enforced.

The comparison between Lulu and Eveline from *Dubliners* (Joyce, 2022) further reinforces this interpretation. Both characters are confronted with the possibility of escape, yet remain bound by responsibility and fear. Eveline's paralysis

at the moment of departure mirrors Lulu's inability to act decisively, highlighting the tension between existential freedom and the weight of social obligation.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that *Intimacy* functions as a critical site where existential and feminist concerns intersect. While Sartre does not explicitly engage with feminist theory, his portrayal of female subjectivity reveals the limitations of a purely abstract notion of freedom. The narrative thus exposes the ways in which gender, embodiment, and social conditioning complicate the existential ideal of autonomous choice, offering a more nuanced understanding of intimacy as a space shaped by both freedom and constraint.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that while Simone de Beauvoir draws significantly from Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological framework, she also extends it by introducing a critical engagement with the question of the "Other." In doing so, Beauvoir not only builds upon Sartrean existentialism but also exposes its limitations, particularly in relation to gender, embodiment, and lived experience.

Through this lens, Sartre's *Intimacy* emerges as a text that, although not explicitly feminist, reflects the conceptual tensions that Beauvoir later articulates more systematically. The narrative reveals how freedom, when situated within social and gendered structures, becomes constrained and internally negotiated rather than purely autonomous.

The analysis of Lulu's character illustrates this intersection, where existential freedom is complicated by embodied experience and social expectation. Her condition highlights the gap between philosophical abstraction and lived reality, reinforcing Beauvoir's argument that subjectivity cannot be understood independently of material and cultural conditions.

Ultimately, *Intimacy* stands as a literary testament to the intertwined development of existential and feminist thought. It reveals how the philosophical dialogue between Sartre and Beauvoir produces a more nuanced understanding of freedom, identity, and intimacy—one that acknowledges both the possibility of transcendence and the constraints imposed by gendered existence.

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